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EDU 221

Student Sample: Description/Explanation of Visual Product

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“To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face? We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.”

-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden,* Chapter 2: “Where I Lived and What I Lived For”

I chose to focus on this passage from the second chapter of *Walden,* “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” because I feel Thoreau’s concern about people not being fully awake, or “alive,” still resonates heavily in today’s society—if not at an even larger degree than it did during Thoreau’s lifetime. It is too often that I’ve witnessed people simply going through the motions of their lives, taking on one task from the next for the sole purpose of getting that task done and then moving on, striving towards an end that never seems to come. Furthermore, so many of us are taking medications to help us function—perhaps the modern-day version of the “mechanical aids” that Thoreau refers to—whether those medications help us to focus, help us to control our anxiety, or help us to ban symptoms of depression, we’ve become easily dependent upon them. It has become so difficult for us to live and breathe in the present moment, and to appreciate the positive aspects of our lives because we are living so passively, trying to keep up with society’s demands. We aren’t trying to “elevate our lives by a conscious endeavor.” Instead, we are living like sheep, allowing ourselves to be herded blindly in all kinds of different, meaningless directions.

In my visual rendition of this passage from *Walden,* I decided to put Thoreau’s contrast between being “awake” and not being “awake” into a modern-day context. Personally, I believe that one of the biggest contributors to our ever-increasing state of “sleepiness” or lack of awareness of the world around us and our struggle to live in the present moment is the oppressive integration of technology into society. While technology can be a useful tool, there comes a point where it consumes us more than it aids us; having too much technology in our lives makes us even more passive than we were when Thoreau accused man of never being awake, and that’s a terrifying thought. It’s a fact that none of us want to face, yet I, at just twenty-one years old, have witnessed countless couples staring at their phones rather than interacting with one another while on “dates” at restaurants. I have watched children shut themselves into their bedroom with their computers for hours on end, never seeing sunlight except for when it creeps in through their blinds. I have seen parents toss an iPad at their children during a family meal just to keep them quiet. I have seen people tap away at computers for a living, complaining about their arthritis and weight gain, wishing that they had more time to be active, to breathe fresh air. I’ve seen students who can’t sit still long enough to read a book or write with a pencil because they have become so accustomed to screens that books no longer hold meaning, purpose, or fulfillment. The immediacy of technology has trained us to expect everything in life to be immediate. Then, when things aren’t immediate, we panic. Our palms sweat, our head pounds, we get *bored.* Our reliance on technology thus makes it even more difficult for us to live in the moment and to be mindful of the lives we are leading; to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. The great twenty-first century influx technology has put us into an even deeper state of sleep than Thoreau could have imagined possible 162 years ago.

The goal of my visual rendition of this concept from *Walden* is to make Thoreau’s argument more relatable and “real” for members of today’s society, and to bring it to the forefront of our busy, distracted minds. Although Thoreau refers to “man” in his passage, I used silhouettes of females in my visual piece to make it more “modern” as well as to show that the plague of being “asleep” affects each and every one of us, gender exclusive. The rhetorical device I focused most on was that of contrast, using light and dark images as well as the physical positions of the women to show the stark difference between being awake and asleep. I used silhouettes instead of photographs of people because I wanted them to appear anonymous, universal, and void—things can be filled and consumed. The fact that the women are depicted as silhouettes also invites the idea that anyone can *become* these people; we can either let ourselves “sleep” through life or“carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look,” as Thoreau says we should strive to do. Thoreau, like all transcendentalists, believed that individuality is more important and more valuable than conformity, but in today’s society it has become difficult for people to act as individuals with the influence of media and advertisement. Using Photoshop, I layered the images and filled the silhouettes with an image that I felt best depicted the contrast between the “sleeping” figure and the “awake” figure; the sleeping figure is literally made up of—“consumed” by—apps, while the “awake” figure is transparent; the sunlight is shining through her, and her face is towards the sky. She has let her immediate surroundings consume her rather than the distractions of technology, and her “void” has been filled with the present moment. She embodies what I believe to be someone who is, as Thoreau would consider, “awake” in today’s society.

Works Cited

Thoreau, Henry David. “Where I Lived and What I Lived For.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* Ed. Julia Reidhead. New York: Norton & Company, Inc. 901-10. Print.

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